

Japan



Satsuki Kawano, Glenda S. Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long, eds., *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*

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JAPAN HAS EXPERIENCED continuous dynamic cultural change throughout the postwar era. The growth-oriented prosperity of the 1960s through the early 1990s brought about the creation of a broad middle-class culture, but the more recent period of recession has led to a deep questioning of these middle class ideals. The early years of the new century have brought a sharp increase in precarious forms of employment, a widening gap between haves and have-nots, a greater emphasis on the individual, and a rapid rise in divorce rates.

Anthropologists Satsuki Kawano, Glenda S. Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long have assembled a fascinating and very worthy volume in *Capturing Contemporary Japan*. The goal of this work is to examine the many changes that have occurred in Japanese society since the collapse of Japan's "bubble economy" in the early 1990s. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, backed by a strong economy, Japan developed a white collar, middle-class urban model where the goal of an aspiring male was to obtain a university degree and become a salaryman in a major company. A female was to marry this man and become a full-time homemaker and the mother of two children. "The class ideology during the postwar period was that Japan was an 'all-middle-class' society, and it reflected not only the society's improving economic conditions, but also minimized the differences in income, prestige, and power in pre-bubble Japan" (3–4).

The editors determine that as a result of the "bubble" in the 1990s and the financial crisis that started in 2008, "present conditions in Japan can be understood in terms of the shift toward differentiation and uncertainty" (4). During the long recession during and after the 1990s, Japanese corporations resorted to outsourcing many manufacturing jobs, thus decreasing the number of regular jobs in Japan, and many small and medium-sized enterprises went under. The result was a decrease in the number of regular jobs that in many cases were replaced with more irregular positions with few—if any—benefits. The tradition of lifetime employment began to wane. Lower incomes and unstable working conditions raised the bar for both marriage and child rearing and led to a growing income gap throughout Japanese society.

These changing economic conditions have brought about significant changes in Japanese society where

A regular employee might be dismissed or a reputable company might go bankrupt. A homemaker might have to get a job if her husband's income

is reduced. Divorce rates have risen and marriage no longer provides “life-time employment” to women. The middle class, which used to be backed by the thriving economy, is no longer as attainable, secure or predictable, and this change provides a context in which people have begun to reevaluate the postwar ideals. Moreover, as in other postindustrial societies, self-realization and individuality have become much more important in today’s Japan ... [T]here developed the recognition that an all-middle class society had ended. (4)

Glenda Roberts examines the collapse of the middle class ideal in her opening chapter on the Fujis, a blue collar family living in the Kansai region. The wife, Sachi, and her late husband held regular jobs, bought a house, and sent their children to private schools, but their three children, now in their twenties and thirties, despite a willingness to work hard and a good education, experienced great difficulty in obtaining regular, high-paying jobs. Their goal of secure long-term employment was simply not possible. Sachi herself, whose husband died in 2005 and who would have retired in better times in her mid-50s, has had to forsake retirement for yet another income-producing job.

Anthropologist Gordon Mathews examines the changing status and role of men in society. He notes that in the heyday of postwar Japan, the function of the male was to work hard at the office; he had little time for his family and child rearing, and managing the household was his wife’s responsibility, but this era is over. Today it is becoming more common to see both husband and wife working. Husbands are spending far more time at home sharing in the housework and caring for the children. In some cases this has led to better, closer marriages, but in some instances male participation in family life has led to increased stress and disagreements on how to manage the household.

Mathews notes that, “Twenty years ago, I found that most men I interviewed were forced to live for work, given the massive amount of time it took up in their lives and the limited role they were expected to play in their families. Today, however, the gendered division of labor has partially given way: many women seek more from their marriages than a husband’s salary; they desire affection and communication as well” (77). Today a man must live *for* his family if he wants to preserve the family. Men today have far fewer extramarital affairs than in the past, but still the divorce rate has risen sharply because a woman’s own ability to earn a good income makes her less dependent on her husband’s income and more willing to end a marriage that is not personally fulfilling.

Women have gained in stature and opportunity in the new Japan. They have moved away from the stereotypical image of a full time housewife and are entering the workforce in increasing numbers. They are pursuing their own careers, marrying later, and, in even greater numbers, not marrying or opting out of marriages that no longer please them. Sawa Kurotani, in her chapter “Working Women of the Bubble Generation,” notes that although women still face pressure to marry and have children, increasing numbers seek careers forsaking the traditional role of marriage and child rearing. The well-educated, self-sufficient, career-oriented woman, either married or unmarried, is fast becoming a norm in Japanese society.

In an interesting twist, unmarried daughters are more and more becoming the primary caregivers for their elderly parents. Women are now graduating in greater numbers from top universities and are using their educational background to get high-paying jobs.

Other women are giving up the traditional middle-class lifestyle for alternative lives where they can exhibit their own individuality and creativity. Nancy Rosenberger, in her chapter “Making an Ant’s Forehead of Difference,” studies a young woman, Kana, who has left mainstream society to take up organic farming where she can keep her own hours and do what she wants when she wants. Rosenberger notes that more and more women, as well as many men, are moving away from the status quo, “living according to values, roles and actions that are alternative to those favored in postwar mainstream life” (107). Lynne Y. Nakano, in her chapter “Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan,” analyzes single women and how they see themselves during and then after their marriageable years. More and more women are forsaking marriage because better education and higher-paying jobs have made women more self-reliant. When they are younger they feel pressure to marry, but by their forties this pressure dissipates and they can focus strictly on their careers. This trend contributes to Japan’s very low fertility rate. Joshua Hotaka Roth shows the increased individualism of modern Japanese women by demonstrating how more and more women are taking up driving and have embraced lightweight cars (so-called *kei* cars) to fulfill their domestic roles.

This contrary individualism, however, is not limited to younger women. Satsuki Kawano tells of some elderly women who refuse to live with their daughters or sons—they prefer to live on their own and hire their own caregivers. Many also decide to have their ashes upon cremation scattered in the sea or elsewhere rather than having their remains placed in a family plot. Grandparents and great-grandparents now see less and less of their grandchildren, but as Susan Orpett Long notes, their children still see the value of maintaining relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. While the extended family is breaking down in Japan and individualism is increasing, some old traditions remain, even if in truncated form.

One of the most interesting chapters is Gavin Hamilton Whitelaw’s study of the growing culture of convenience stores that proliferate in Japan’s urban areas. When I first came to Japan as a college student in 1968, Tokyo was full of small “mom-and-pop” stores that sold fruit, fresh vegetables, and other specialty products, but they have largely disappeared in favor of larger supermarkets and a seemingly endless array of convenience stores. These convenience stores supply the basic needs of the public, selling everything from stationery to hand cream, but their most active commodities are prepackaged food items like *bento* (lunch) boxes. Competition is stiff, so franchise companies insist that food items must be fresh and quickly removed and discarded. Whitelaw, who actually worked in a convenience store while conducting his research, demonstrates that little of this older food is actually discarded, but rather consumed by the store owner, his family, and employees. Because of the huge proliferation of these stores, it has become much more difficult to establish a thriving convenience store in Tokyo.

The editors and chapter authors of *Capturing Contemporary Japan* have done an excellent job in creating a social portrait of a rapidly changing Japan. They cover a very broad range of topics in sufficient depth to provide the interested reader with a broad understanding of the postwar era, especially since the end of the “bubble economy” of the late 1980s. The chapters are well researched and clearly written, although there are a few instances of unnecessary and difficult to comprehend academic jargon. This work would be an excellent reader for an upper-division undergraduate or graduate anthropology course focusing on Japan.

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